

Learning Languages in a Bilingual Household

Kiyoshi's Trip to the U.S. at Age Six

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In their book *The Natural Approach*, Krashen and Terrell point out that:

All human beings can acquire additional languages, but they must have the desire or the need to acquire the language and the opportunity to use the language they study for real communicative purposes. (p. 17)

In her book *The Bilingual Experience*, de Jong says:

Holidays abroad- or having visitors from abroad- offer a natural opportunity for a language to be used and practised, and I feel it is very important for a child to be able to see some point in learning or keeping up a second language. (p. 20)

With these in mind I took my son Kiyoshi, aged six, with me on a trip to the United States during the summer vacation from August 18 to September 21, 1986. It was not the first time Kiyoshi had visited the U.S., but his other two trips, at fourteen and twenty-three months, have barely stayed in his conscious memory. Our activities included sightseeing, shopping, and seeing friends and relatives, and we visited, in order, New Mexico, Florida, Colorado, Arizona, and California. Kiyoshi hears English spoken at home every day, but he has resisted using it himself. I was hoping on this trip to show him that English is a language spoken by many people in a large country called the U. S., where his mother was born and raised, and I was hoping that he would want to use it, too, in order to be able to communicate with people there.

Once it was decided that he and I would be going without his father and brother and how long we would be staying, I tried to prepare him for the experience by talking about what we would be doing and who we would be seeing. Kiyoshi was not very excited about the trip, though he expressed an interest in some of our plans. He especially wanted to meet his American cousins and to see wildlife, such as the horseshoe crabs, starfish, robins, and hummingbirds he had seen in picture books. He hoped to be able to catch something to bring home to show the other children at the nursery school he attends here in Nagano. We also spent some time doing an *Oxford*

Junior Workbook, Book 1. This involved me reading a word or phrase and Kiyoshi pointing at or coloring a picture. In retrospect, the vocabulary he studied, “one brown dot” or “two red boys”, for example, was not very useful.

During the trip Kiyoshi and I spoke Japanese to each other almost all of the time, and I translated his remarks into English for the benefit of others. Other than that, he heard Japanese spoken there only by the Japan Air Lines staff at Los Angeles International Airport and by a Japanese woman married to an Italian-American man we met very briefly near the end of the trip in California. I tried to teach Kiyoshi English words and phrases as he needed them and from time to time encouraged him to speak directly to people there. Sometimes I spoke to him in English, but this upset him.

This report is based on a diary I kept during the trip. In it I made notes about Kiyoshi's use of and attitude toward English and the way he reacted to the various people we encountered, who were almost all strangers to Kiyoshi, children and adults in public places and my friends and relatives. Special attention was given to Kiyoshi's interaction with his maternal grandmother, “Grandma”, and his cousins, Kelsey, aged six, Korbin, aged three, and Matthew, aged one.

THEORY AND TERMS

Krashen and Terrell's book is mainly focused on the teaching of foreign languages to adult beginners, but they also discuss things that are applicable to Kiyoshi's case. An important distinction they make is the difference between “acquisition” and “learning”:

Simply, “acquiring” a language is “picking it up,” i. e., developing ability in a language by using it in natural communicative situations. Children acquire their first language, and most probably, second languages as well. (p. 18)

Language “learning” is different from acquisition. Language learning is “knowing the rules,” having a conscious knowledge about grammar. (p. 18)

One's attitude toward a second language can affect how well or poorly one does in it. Krashen and Terrell explain the relationship between attitude and the “affective filter” in this way:

Dulay and Burt have suggested that attitudinal factors may relate to second language acquisition in the following way: performers with optimal attitudes have a lower “affective filter”. A low filter means that the performer is more “open” to the input, and that the input strikes “deeper”, to use Stevick's term. Thus, having the right attitudes may do two things for second language

acquirers : it will encourage them to try to get more input, to interact with speakers of the target language with confidence, and also to be more receptive to the input they get. (p. 38)

In other words, a good attitude and low anxiety levels are conducive to a low affective filter, which in turn is conducive to successful second language acquisition.

For a period of time after their first exposure to a new language, acquirers may actually say very little besides the "routines and patterns", that is, "sentences that are memorized wholes or partially memorized wholes" (p. 42), they need to function. This is called the "silent period". Krashen and Terrell describe it this way:

The silent period may be the time during which acquirers build up competence by active listening, via input. In accordance with the input hypothesis, speaking ability emerges after enough competence has been developed by listening and understanding. (p. 36)

In studies of children acquiring a second language, the silent period has been observed to last several months. As I remember it, after I came to Japan as an adult, where I "acquired", rather than "learned" Japanese, my silent period lasted for several years. I have also noticed this in the students I have had in my English classes, who could be described as "false beginners" who have had six years of English reading, writing, and grammar, but relatively little contact with the spoken language. It is very rare to find a student who is willing to contribute to a conversation in English right away. To sum up, a silent period is normal behavior.

They also discuss age differences in second language acquisition:

Contrary to popular opinion, it is not simply the case that "younger is better," that children are better than adults in all respects in second language acquisition. Rather, children are "better" with respect to ultimate attainment; over the long run, those who start second languages as children will usually reach higher levels of competence than those who start as adults (i. e. after age 15). Over the short run, however, adults are faster in attaining second language proficiency than children. (p. 45)

Kiyoshi did not make much noticeable improvement in his English during the five weeks he spent in America. A college-age student, however, who had studied some English and was staying in the U. S. for about the same length of time, could be expected to show a marked improvement for the following reasons:

1. First, older acquirers are better at "managing conversations", or controlling the input directed at them and making it comprehensible.
2. A second factor contributing to older acquirers' greater speed in initial stages is their greater ability to "beat the silent period" to produce in the second language using structures that have not yet been acquired.
3. A third reason for the older acquirers' rate superiority in initial stages is the fact that older acquirers have a greater knowledge of the world. (p. 46)

I would like to add to this that older acquirers are also more likely to be able

to recognize and take advantage of a potential language-learning opportunity and to have more poise in social situations in spite of the differences in culture.

FROM MY DIARY

English Kiyoshi Used and Understood

The following are spontaneous utterances Kiyoshi made:

Word or Phrase	Date	Comments
Cola.	8/18	On a domestic flight in the U.S. Kiyoshi said this in answer to the stewardess's question about what he wanted to drink.
This is a cherry coke.	8/28, 9/19	Kiyoshi learned this from a television commercial he had seen in Japan. Both times I heard him use it he was talking to himself; it was totally unrelated to the context.
No! No! No!	9/16, 9/18	These were emotional situations when Kiyoshi wanted to stop his cousins from doing something, e. g. changing the TV channel or picking up an object he wanted.
Frog.	9/17	Kelsey reported that while playing outside, Kiyoshi pointed to a frog and said this.
Big spider.	9/17	Kiyoshi said this to Grandma and me when he showed us a spider he had caught.
Come on. Come on.	9/19	Kiyoshi said this to his cousins. The previous day he had asked me how to say, "おいで" in English.

In addition to the above, Kiyoshi was also heard to use the names of those people he met there that he was most interested in: Grandma and his cousins, Kelsey and Korbin.

The following are prompted utterances. These were supplied in context, usually by me, and used in social situations throughout the trip. Sometimes he was able to produce these routines and patterns with very little prompting:

Function	Phrase or Sentence
Greeting	Good morning.
Parting	Good night. Bye-bye.
Request	(Scissors), please.
Apology	I'm sorry.
Expression of Appreciation and Response	Thank you. You are welcome.

From time to time during the trip, Kiyoshi would ask how to say a Japanese word or phrase in English. These were always in context, and he would repeat them after me:

Word or Phrase	English Meaning	Place
で っ か い な	big	at Disney World
お ば け	ghost	on a ride at Disney World in which ghosts appeared
が い こ つ	skeleton	at a show at Sea World in which a skeleton appeared
お い で	Come here./ Come on.	at his cousins' house

Once at his cousins' house he came in to tell me that Korbin had pulled his pants down and ask me how to say “きんたま” in English. I was not sure whether I should tell him or not. On the last day, while we were waiting for our flight at Los Angeles International Airport, Kiyoshi wanted to play a word game by asking me how to say various words in English. These were not necessarily in context:

Word	English Meaning
ジ ャ ッ ト き	jet plane
う め ぼ し	pickled plum

Sometimes I tried to teach Kiyoshi vocabulary items in context without his asking for them. That he did not seem to listen seriously can be seen in the following excerpt from my diary:

September 1- Ouray, Colorado

This morning we had fun feeding sunflower seeds to the chipmunks at Box Canyon. I tried to teach Kiyoshi to say “chipmunk”, but he repeated it as “チップウンチ”, “チップマル”, or “チップス”. That evening I asked him about the word, but he could not remember it, even after I gave him a hint.

Television was another source of English input for Kiyoshi in the U.S. He enjoyed watching it even though he could only understand a word here and there:

September 1- Durango, Colorado

In the evening, Kiyoshi watched a documentary about animals on television. They showed some beavers. Kiyoshi vocalized “beavers” after he heard it in the commentary as though he was surprised to find it was similar to the Japanese “ビーバー”.

September 18- Indian Wells, California

My sister reported hearing Kiyoshi singing the word “Gobots” as he had heard it in a TV cartoon theme song.

Kiyoshi was able to pick his own name and a few other familiar words, e. g. “sleep”, “water”, and “sandwich”, out of the flow of conversation between Grandma and me, and sometimes he would ask about or comment on what we were saying:

August 31- on the way to Ouray, Colorado

It was getting late, but we still had not reached our destination. I asked Grandma, "Is that little Kiyoshi sleeping?" Kiyoshi himself replied, "ねてないよ."

September 3- Durango, Colorado

We were at the drive-in window at MacDonald's. Grandma was ordering, "..... and could we have two waters, please?" Kiyoshi said to himself, "おみずも?"

September 5-Albuquerque, New Mexico

Kiyoshi has not been eating much, so I was pleased when he ate some lunch. I reported this to Grandma later by saying, "Kiyoshi ate two halves of a sandwich." Kiyoshi heard this and wanted to know what I had said. I repeated myself slowly in English and asked him what he thought it meant. He replied, "サンドイッチ."

Kiyoshi and the People Around Him

In public places, Kiyoshi seemed to be indifferent to most of the adults he saw, and he did not seem to be surprised by the variety of skin and hair colors or body shapes and sizes. Since he was with me, people assumed that he could speak English and occasionally said things to him. He was quite unprepared for this and either ignored them or ran away:

August 21- Orlando, Florida

On the train going back to the parking lot after a day at Disney World, a middle-aged woman sitting across from us asked Kiyoshi how he had enjoyed the day. He did not answer and may not have realized that she had been speaking to him. I asked him her question in Japanese and told her his answer.

August 24- Orlando, Florida

We were at Sea World. I was seated at a fast food restaurant about fifty meters from Kiyoshi while he was looking at and petting sting rays in a shallow pool. He came running over to me on the verge of tears because someone had said something to him in English. Most likely it was the guide who was standing near him giving a talk about the rays and feeding them. I tried to teach him to say, "I don't speak English."

Since we were traveling during the summer vacation and visiting parks, zoos, and other places where people would naturally bring their families, Kiyoshi saw a lot of children. He did not try to communicate with them, but in some places, such as the pool at our hotel in Florida where we swam several times, he did not mind being near them. Other times, he tried to avoid them:

August 31- Albuquerque, New Mexico

When we were walking through Old Town Plaza at dusk, Kiyoshi noticed three children (one younger and two older than he) on the bandstand calling

out to people passing by. He moved to the far side of our group to avoid being seen by them.

September 1- Durango, Colorado

We went to dinner at a restaurant where we were seated near another table of children. Kiyoshi wanted to sit on the side of the table farthest from them.

Of the people we visited in the U.S., Kiyoshi was most comfortable with and interacted most with his maternal grandmother, who is monolingual in English. He remembered meeting her on previous trips in the U.S. and Japan, and we spent the entire five-week period with her. He calls her "Grandma" to distinguish her from his Japanese grandmother, who is "おばあちゃん". Most communication between Grandma and Kiyoshi was through me, though they said "Thank you", "You are welcome", "Good morning", and "Good night" to each other. Other than those phrases, they relied on the names "Grandma", "Mama", and "Kiyoshi" plus appropriate gestures to communicate because Kiyoshi became frustrated when his early attempts to speak English were not understood:

August 19- Albuquerque, New Mexico

Today was our second day in America. Kiyoshi wanted to make something out of paper and string, so he needed scissors and tape. I told him that he must ask Grandma himself because I did not know where these things were. He agreed. I taught him, "Scissors, please" and sent him out to her. She had overheard me, so she gave him the scissors right away. She did not, however, hear me teach him, "Tape, please", and did not understand his pronunciation when he came out to ask for it. Only "please" was clear to her. Kiyoshi was obviously frustrated by this.

August 26- Orlando, Florida

Kiyoshi heard Grandma say, "..... Where is it?" He asked me the meaning of her question in Japanese and repeated the question again after me in English.

August 31-Albuquerque, New Mexico

We found a spider in our bedroom this morning. Kiyoshi told me to go tell Grandma. I called out the word "くも", but he told me to speak English for Grandma. I tried to teach him "spider", but he would not repeat it, and he would not go to tell Grandma.

September 10- San Diego, California

Kiyoshi and I are staying with my friend Terri. Grandma came over to stay with Kiyoshi while Terri and I went out at about 6 p. m. to go shopping. Before going I explained to Kiyoshi where I would be going and what I would be doing. He agreed to stay home because he had been shopping with me a number of times on the trip already and had not enjoyed it. Grandma reported that the following things happened while I was gone: At first, Kiyoshi played and colored near Grandma in the dining room. When it began to get dark, he went outside and stood by her car at the curb. Grandma called, "Kiyoshi"

and beckoned for him to come in, but he shook his head. After a while he came in and stood or sat by the front window watching for me. He started to go back and forth between the front window in the living room and his bed in the bedroom. He sniffled and may have been crying. Grandma spoke kindly to him and gestured or rubbed his back. He answered her in Japanese or made gestures. Grandma turned on the TV for him. He indicated "no", so she turned it off. She turned on the radio in another room. He came in, gestured that it was too loud, and said something in Japanese. Kiyoshi went back into the bedroom, but he would peek around the corner from time to time to see that Grandma was still in the dining room. He finally climbed into bed and fell asleep about half an hour before we got home at 9 p.m.

September 15- Indian Wells, California

Grandma reported that the following incident occurred while I was out: After an argument with Korbin, Kiyoshi ran into his room and barricaded himself in. At dinnertime, Grandma took a plate of food for him to his room. She pointed to it and said, "みそ", which was the only Japanese word she remembered which was related to food. He turned his back and hid his face between the beds.

September 17-Indian Wells, California

In the evening Kiyoshi told me in Japanese that he had found something and wanted to show it to Grandma and me. He brought in the insect cage with a spider in it and said in English, "Big spider." We were impressed because it was the first spontaneous English phrase we had heard him produce. I asked him how he had learned it. He said that he knew "big", and he had heard his cousins say "spider" and copied them.

September 18- Indian Wells, California

Kiyoshi stayed home with Grandma and his cousins this morning while I went out shopping. Grandma reported that Kiyoshi had brought a broken toy to her and said clearly, "Grandma", meaning, she thought, "Look. This is broken. I just found it."

The first child that Kiyoshi was actually introduced to and whose home he saw in the U.S. was Chelsea, aged three. It was toward the end of the trip while we were staying with Terri, an old friend of mine:

September 12- San Diego, California

Terri took Kiyoshi and me to visit her brother, his wife, and their daughter Chelsea, who was very friendly to us. At first Kiyoshi insisted on staying outside, but some big dogs came along and changed his mind. It had been nearly a month since Kiyoshi had been in a child's room where there were a lot of toys. He enjoyed playing there very much and was reluctant to leave. We went for a ride in the car. Chelsea sat between Kiyoshi and me in the back seat. She asked me to translate things Kiyoshi said and tried to speak "Japanese" to him by making random sounds, which Kiyoshi thought were English.

On the trip, Kiyoshi had been looking forward most of all to meeting his American cousins, Kelsey, Korbin, and Matthew. In fact, he had expressed his disappointment on the first day in the U.S. when they were not waiting for him

at Grandma's house. We did not see them until the last week of the trip, when we stayed at my sister's house with her family and my brother and his family. Once, after a party earlier in the trip that Kiyoshi had refused to join, I asked him if he would act that way when he met his cousins. He replied that they were friends, so he would try to talk to them. When he actually met them, though, things did not go so easily. At times, they played together very successfully, especially when their attention was focused outwardly, in the pool or the sprinklers or with the frogs and insects in the yard. Other times, they fought and cried:

September 14- Indian Wells, California

The whole family went to church, and Kiyoshi and I went with them. Kiyoshi agreed to go with Kelsey to the Sunday School with the other children while I went to the service with the adults. Afterwards, I asked Kelsey what they had done. She reported that they had played tic-tac-toe and sung songs, then they had gone to another room, where they had colored. Kelsey and Kiyoshi had gone up to the front of the class, where Kelsey had told the others his name. They had gotten a picture and a cookie to take home. Kiyoshi had not said anything in Japanese or English the whole time, but he had done what she had told him to do. She thought that he had understood what she said.

September 16-Indian Wells, California

Kiyoshi reported that while he had been watching a program he liked on television, Kelsey had come along and suddenly changed the channel. He had shouted, "No! No! No!", but she had not changed it back.

September 18-Indian Wells, California

When I told Kiyoshi that I would be going out again and he would be staying home with Grandma and his cousins, he said that they might fight. I told him that he must try to make up with them if they did. He asked me what to say in English in that case, and I taught him, "I'm sorry." Later that day Kiyoshi, Kelsey, Korbin, Matthew, and I were playing in the parking lot of the Automobile Association of America office while Grandma was inside getting some information. Kiyoshi and Kelsey were up in a tree; Korbin was down on the ground. When Korbin picked up a branch that Kiyoshi had thrown down from the tree, Kiyoshi yelled, "こら! こら! こら! No! No! No!"

It was interesting to note that on the morning after our return to Nagano, Kiyoshi yelled, "No! No! No! だめ! だめ!" at his younger brother Mikio, when he touched one of Kiyoshi's toys.

Kiyoshi's Attitude Toward the Language and People

Before the trip I asked Kiyoshi what he would do in a place where everyone spoke only English. He said that he would have me translate everything for him, so it seems that he did not go to the U. S. with the idea that he would study English

there and learn to speak it. The following are some comments he made during the trip that reflect his attitude toward the language and people. I have translated his remarks here into English:

August 31-Albuquerque, New Mexico

When I suggested to Kiyoshi that he learn English so that he could ask Grandma if he could let the dog in the house by himself, he got upset. He said that he had been born in Japan and lived there all his life, so he did not know English.

September 1-Durango, Colorado

When I tried to explain to Kiyoshi that he could learn to speak more than one language, as his father and I have, he said that his time in America was too short. If he stayed here "ten or one hundred days" he could learn English.

September 5-Albuquerque, New Mexico

Kiyoshi wanted a shovel to catch ants at Grandma's house. I taught him, "May I have a shovel, please?" He said it was too long, so I taught him, "Shovel, please" and "Big shovel." He practiced a little so that he could go ask Grandma, but he lost his courage and hid behind a chair. He said he did not want to speak English now; he would study it when he got bigger. He wanted to speak Japanese. He does not want to come back here because he has to speak English.

Later, Kiyoshi wanted a piece of the tape I was using for a robot he was making. I asked him in English, "How much? How long?" He began to look as if he might cry and said that if I spoke only English he would not be able to say anything. As he left the room, he made a face at me and said, "べーぢー", which is the Japanese equivalent of the raspberries.

September 6-Albuquerque, New Mexico

There was a dinner party at Grandma's house tonight, but Kiyoshi refused to join it. After the guests had gone, I asked him why he had acted that way. He said that he and the other children at his nursery school did not like to talk to people they did not know. Also, the people here were too noisy.

Large groups of people at Disney World, Sea World, or other public places did not bother Kiyoshi, but too many people in the houses where we were staying were upsetting to him. He would cry, hide under or behind pieces of furniture, or stay in another room or outside. Verbal interaction was out of the question, and his fear of the group was even stronger than his hunger pangs. This happened on all three occasions during the trip when we were with large groups of friends or relatives: when the six people came over for dinner at Grandma's house in the September 6 excerpt, at times while we were staying at my sister's house, and at an open-house party at a cousin's house, which was attended by twenty to thirty relatives, the day before we returned to Japan.

CONCLUSIONS AND COMMENTS

In her survey of bilingual families in England, de Jong asked parents why they had chosen to raise their children bilingually and what advantages they thought it would have for the children:

The answers given most regularly were: "knowing two languages makes it easier to learn a third or fourth", "later it will benefit them job-wise", "increases self-confidence", "makes them more tolerant and open-minded", "more choices and more chances", and "two worlds are open to you rather than only one". (p. 25)

The most important reason, however, was that the children should be able to communicate with relatives and friends on both sides of the family. For all of the above reasons, I have wanted Kiyoshi to know both languages. Unfortunately, a child cannot understand the long-term and abstract (to a six-year-old) advantages to this. This makes encouraging a young child to use a language other than the one used in the community very difficult, as de Jong described in the cases of her family and others who participated in her survey, and I am finding out with my own children.

Many families cope with this by taking their children abroad to see their relatives and friends or having family come to visit:

One begins almost to wonder whether parents could in fact leave it to those holiday occasions and forget about the bilingual upbringing at home. The point is, however, that a language can't be learned from scratch within the time limit set by a holiday period. It is true that children can tremendously improve upon their command of a language over a two, three, or four week period, but only if the basic knowledge of the language is there. (p. 20)

One of the main reasons I planned the trip this summer was to see how much of a passive knowledge of English Kiyoshi had acquired and whether or not he would be able to use any of it. One thing I realized there was that he did not have enough of this "basic knowledge of the language". He may have heard his father and me speaking English to each other every day since he was born, but after reading Krashen and Terrell I can see that this alone could not be considered optimal input for Kiyoshi's second language acquisition. The type of language we use does not fit Krashen and Terrell's definition of "Caretaker Speech", which is the type of language spoken by parents or other adults to children:

1. It is motivated by the caretaker's desire to be understood.
2. Caretaker speech is structurally simpler than the language adults use to each other.
3. Caretaker speech is about the here and now. (p. 34)

Kiyoshi's father and I rarely use English to Kiyoshi when talking about things that

concern him and almost never require a response from him in English. A great deal of what we talk about to each other is not related to what we are doing at the time, such as events of the day or plans for the future, and we make no effort to use simple grammatical structures. Without a context, it is akin to listening to a radio program in an unknown foreign language, that is, incomprehensible input. No wonder Kiyoshi has "turned it off" for the most part!

Even in his native language and culture, Kiyoshi takes some time to warm up to new people and situations. The U.S. is a foreign country for him, so I had expected him to take even longer to become accustomed to new people and things there. With respect to language, I had expected a silent period. I had hoped, though, that the length of the trip, five weeks, would be enough time for him to gain the confidence to use the little bit of English he knows. Indeed, most of his spontaneous utterances were made at the end of the trip, but it is difficult to say whether he had become accustomed to English or was more motivated to speak with other children around.

What I was not prepared for was his fear of large groups of people in the houses where we were staying and his anti-social behavior with respect to them. He is only a child, so people understood, I think, but to me, his mother and a guest there, it was very distressing. My heart went out to him because he was feeling some complex emotions, but I could not always focus my entire attention on him. It was especially difficult when we were with relatives that I see very infrequently. I really wished that Kiyoshi's father and brother had come along on the trip with us at these times to give him moral support. From the point of view of language learning, Kiyoshi's extreme shyness at these gatherings was very unfortunate because by avoiding people he was missing out on the input that might have helped him acquire some English. I tried humor, reasoning, threats, everything I could think of to coax him into joining us, but nothing worked, and I realized that forcing him would be counterproductive.

In conclusion, I still think that becoming bilingual should be our goal, but I can definitely see that I need to work with Kiyoshi more on it. He requires a low-anxiety situation, and he needs to be given more, and more comprehensible, input.

References

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